NO SEX.

And she's not the only one.
MY SEX-DROUGHT MARRIAGE

“If you’re against gay sex, then you should be all in favour of gay marriage.” That’s a joke from the debate over same-sex marriage. I repeated the joke all the time while in a marital sex drought a decade ago. It consoled me. Because no one ever – ever – needed the punch line explained. It reminded me I wasn’t alone, and that other marriages spiral privately into that peculiar vice, the dirty little secret of celibacy...

There’s such a delicate alchemy to lust during the long haul of a relationship, anyway. Lust naturally fades. Sociobiologist Helen Fisher talks about the “four-year itch. One day you can’t imagine not wanting your spouse. The next, you might as well be in bed with a toaster. And I never had much of that “just do it,” good-trooper spirit about sex. I’d always felt that sex was too important to fool around with when I didn’t feel like it. Sometimes people end up celibate not because they care too little about their erotic life but because they care too much about it – too much to fill up on “junk-food” sex.

One of the worst things about celibacy was the shame and guilt. Being abstinent in a marriage is really different from being abstinent while single. When you’re single, you might feel mildly guilty for having sex; when you’re married, you feel guilty for not.

Most of us aren’t really blase or laissez-faire about our neighbours’ sex lives. We care about who’s having sex with whom, in a way that’s all at once anxious, voyeuristic, prurient, squeamish, confused and judgmental.

Only when I fell out of step with marriage norms – when I stopped having sex – did I realise how much I’d been calibrating my marriage to other people’s standards. Before, I hadn’t noticed, because I wasn’t a marital misfit. We enjoyed the smug comfort of having a “normal”, traditional marriage that included all the usual activities.

But normal according to what? Movies? Magazines? They create this illusion – almost an accusation – that everyone has sex better, more often and more zanily than you do.

Also, abstinence made me feel like a complete fraud, an impostor who wasn’t in a “real marriage.” Were other non-conjugal marriages real, I challenged myself? There are lots of rich but sexually complicated marriages.

For all my gloom, the one feeling I didn’t have was that I missed sex. Celibacy wasn’t a problem for me in any emotional, authentic, organic sense that I wanted sex and couldn’t have it.

And then I understood the real issue. “Preferring not to” didn’t feel like a legitimate, non-pathological choice. I was left thinking that we’re not permitted not to want sex, or, more accurately, to be happily auto-erotic. As a friend of mine once explained, “I just don’t want to involve anyone else in my sex life.”

Having experienced sexual feast and famine, I’m a defender of celibacy. In a culture that truly respects sex and sees it as healthy, the freedom from having unwanted sex is just as important as the freedom to have wanted sex.

There’s a whole spectrum of desire (although I think we tend to underestimate how much women want sex, and overestimate how much men want it). Some think about sex constantly; some hardly ever.

In our own lives, we probably slide along that spectrum, from caring a lot to caring not at all. A long-term relationship should be able to normalise phases of celibate repose, if both partners can live with it.

I think that’s happening today. My ups and downs in married life sent me on a curiosity-driven quest, to find out what really goes on behind the closed door of marriage, and publish a book about it. I discovered such heterodoxy in the sexual habits of 21st-century marriage, from openly non-monogamous to illicitly non-monogamous to monogamous to contented, self-declared “asexual” marriages to Platonic ones where erotic needs get met in other relationships. And I’m convinced they’re “real marriages”, all of them.

80% of wives say their sex lives are predictable.

Pamela Haag’s Marriage Confidential: The Post-Romantic Age of Workhorse Wives, Royal Children, Undersexed Spouses and Rebel Couples Who Are Rewriting the Rules is published by HarperCollins (£16.99)